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Student expectations and the NSS: action planning at Northumbria University Library: a case study



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LISTENING TO STUDENTS: THE NORTHUMBRIA CONTEXT

As with many other universities, Northumbria listens to its students and strives to use their feedback to improve services and the student experience. It has a tradition of strong links with its students' union and an award-winning student representation system ensures that students have a wide range of opportunities for providing feedback. This is becoming ever more important in a market place increasingly driven by fees, graduate contributions and the rising expectations that come with higher payments and student debt. Future developments including the requirement of universities to publish data about services more widely and the forthcoming student charter which will articulate student entitlements more clearly are key drivers in addressing issues which affect the student learning experience. Encouraging feedback is second nature at Northumbria university library, and evidence from students is continuously used to improve existing services and develop new ones. For us, the National Student Survey (NSS) is a key survey that we use to identify both best practice and improvement areas which will increase not only our own score on the 'library' questions but also impact on the overall rating of the university itself. Of course there are many critics of the NSS: its limitations being seen in some quarters to outweigh its insights, however at Northumbria we recognise

that many issues raised by student in the NSS also resonate with other feedback mechanisms we use e.g. our internal survey and the external findings of the International Student Barometer (ISB). We therefore look at the overall picture of what the various methodologies offer to enable us to make judgements about where to focus our energies and interventions.

RESPONDING TO THE NSS: WHAT WE DO

There are eight academic schools at Northumbria, each with a very different flavour and menu of programmes and each with a very different student population. Issues from one school are not necessarily replicated in others and one of the benefits of the NSS is being able to drill down to programme areas and look at the picture there. This applies equally to those schools which consistently score the library services and facilities highly and there we look at what we're doing to achieve high scores so that we can spread best practice across the wider service, where appropriate. A drawback of the NSS of course, is that it is only completed by final year students and our interventions may however be too late to change their experience. We use our library student satisfaction survey to inform developments year on year across all student cohorts and can triangulate this with our internal university student satisfaction survey (part of our ongoing annual programme monitoring arrangements). It is very important therefore to use the internal work iteratively to ensure that we respond quickly year on year and do not rely solely upon the NSS results.

As with most libraries the university library at Northumbria prides itself on delivering student-centred services which are responsive and customer-led. Our Customer Service Excellence accreditation in 2010 provided us with an external validation and we achieved a 'compliance plus' element for the knowledge we have about our customers' journeys. We use a range of feedback mechanisms to triangulate and validate the results we get. An important element of our work is close and effective liaison with the academic schools and we have named contacts for each school -Library Liaison Advisers - (LLAs) who work closely with academic colleagues to look at comments and concerns on an ongoing basis. What's different for us about the NSS (from the other feedback and benchmarking activities we undertake) is that the whole institution takes notice and there is an institution-wide commitment not only to encouraging as many

eligible students as possible to complete the survey but also in developing an improvement framework. This is a medium to long term planning tool against which we can map progress and deal with issues in a 'joined up' way, across service departments and within and between academic schools.

ACTION PLANNING: A SCHOOL BY SCHOOL APPROACH

Once the NSS results are released we analyse the scores in questions 16 (The library resources and services are good enough for my needs) and 17 (I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to). Whilst strictly speaking it is only question 16 that we can directly influence, we also believe that as the majority of open access IT provision is within the library then we have a responsibility to work collaboratively with our colleagues in IT services to ensure students are able to access and use PCs when they need to.

So across questions 16 and 17 we consider the trends and use a traffic light system for identifying where we need to focus our attention: what's up (green), what's down (red) and what's remaining the same (amber). For each of these categories we chart our actions – what did we do last year in School X that has increased satisfaction, what are we not doing in School Y that may have influenced a dip in scores and sometimes, dishearteningly, what did we do in School Z which we thought would have a positive impact and didn't. The second part of our action plans involve us in looking at all the comments (by School) and identifying potential actions which we might take, for example:

- could digitising book chapters have a greater impact than buying multiple copies of core texts for large student cohorts?
- do we need to review printing charges?
- how might we manage the reservations service more effectively?
- can we zone our learning spaces differently to support a wider range of learning styles and study patterns?

The LLAs end up with an action plan which becomes a 'live' document with which to engage academic colleagues and jointly work through potential solutions. Because the LLAs work as a team they can also see across the schools where best practice might be spread – adopting the reading list template more widely for example, or embedding information literacy in different ways. This overall picture enables us to address

issues quickly and timing is critical in order that the changes we introduce have an impact on the following year's scores.

Where there are resource implications we feed these into our service development planning process to secure additional funding – for example purchasing additional e-books and piloting a patron-demand acquisition project. The LLAs are also able to relate their NSS action plans to other feedback they receive from committees and teaching evaluations, for example, which they again use to gain an overall picture of what's working well in their school and what areas might be improved.

NSS: ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE

Essentially, although the NSS carries a great deal of weight, both in the institution and within the sector, influencing student choice and raising expectations, it is just one mechanism by which we build up our picture of student satisfaction with library services. It is a key measure and one which is used to chart progress and identify issues of particular concern to cohorts of students or programmes of study. LLAs use the results to engage academic colleagues in determining priorities and it is a key performance indicator for us – included alongside other feedback mechanisms in the annual report of library activities which the LLAs produce for their schools. The fact that the results so often triangulate closely with other feedback mechanisms gives the NSS validity from our point of view and our high rating (14th in 2010) is something that we strive hard to achieve and is recognised throughout the university.

In summary, we look forward to each set of NSS results; for us they present an opportunity to understand how students use library services, what they think of them, which ones they are satisfied with and in which particular which areas we could seek to improve upon in terms of assuring the relevance of our services and satisfaction with them.